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Rule-Following and the Ontology of the Mind

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Abstract

Rule-following has become a focus of philosophical interest since Kripke's interpretation of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. The case which Kripke makes is an argument against reducing the description of the beliefs of a person to a description in naturalistic terms. However, it has also implications for the metaphysics of mind. I claim that, contrary to what one might expect, Kripke's case contains an argument in favour of materialism in ontology.

1. The problem of rule-following

Meaning is an essential feature of the beliefs of a person. When it comes to accounting for meaning, we face the problem of rule-following. Saul Kripke (1982) presents this problem in a forceful way in his interpretation of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. The case which he makes contains an argument against reducing the description of the beliefs of a person to a description in naturalistic terms. However, little attention is paid to the fact that Kripke's case is also relevant to the metaphysics of mind. Contrary to what one might expect, I shall show that an argument against reduction in epistemology along Kripke's lines is at the same time an argument for materialism in ontology.

Let us start by briefly recalling the problem of rule-following and its social solution. Kripke shows that any finite sequence of examples of whatever sort satisfies infinitely many rules. On this basis, he develops a sceptical challenge to the assumption that our beliefs have a determinate meaning. Two aspects of this challenge can be distinguished:

- the *infinity problem*: How can a finite sequence of examples instantiate only one rule rather than infinitely many rules? The sceptical challenge is: *There are infinitely many possible ways of continuing any finite sequence of examples in any new situation. Each of these ways is in accordance with the rule which the sequence instantiates under some interpretation of what the rule is.*
- the *normativity problem*: What determines which is the correct manner to continue a finite sequence of examples in such a way that a person can follow a rule (so that for her there is a distinction between following the rule correctly and following it incorrectly)? The sceptical challenge is: *For any finite sequence of examples and for any new situation of continuing the sequence in question, it is not determined what [192]is the correct way to go on.*

Kripke argues that neither ideas in the mind, nor dispositions to behaviour, nor meanings as abstract objects (Fregean senses) are able to solve the problem of rule-following. Insofar as he proposes a solution at all, he proposes a social solution. Social practices are necessary in order to (a) determine a meaning for the beliefs of a person given the infinitely many logically possible meanings of any finite sequence and (b) enable a person to make a distinction between correct and incorrect rule-following. Kripke regards the social solution as a sceptical solution which yields only assertibility conditions, but not truth conditions for statements

about meaning. The social solution which I will sketch in the next section is intended to be non-committal on this point and thereby deviates from Kripke's text: it can be read as a sceptical solution; but it can also be seen as providing truth-conditions for rule-following and thus facts of meaning.

2. A social account of meaning

How can social practices account for meaning? Consider the following six steps. These steps are modelled on the proposals of Philip Pettit (1993), pp. 76–108, and John Haugeland ("The Intentionality All-Stars" in Haugeland (1998), pp. 147–150):

- 1) *Although any finite sequence of examples can be continued in infinitely many different ways, for any finite thinking being there usually is one specific way in which this being is disposed to continue such a sequence.* To give an intuitive idea of what this step and the following ones can be like, imagine a sequence of trees in a physical environment and reactions of persons towards this sequence, in particular reactions of classifying or refusing to classify items with this sequence.
- 2) *Persons who have the same biological equipment and who share a physical environment have by and large similar dispositions.*
- 3) *The dispositions of persons who have the same biological equipment and who share a physical environment include a disposition to cooperation.* This is a disposition to adapt one's dispositions and one's behaviour to the dispositions and the behaviour of one's fellows.
- 4) *The disposition to cooperation in humans is such that, owing to this disposition, humans react to each other's actions by applying sanctions in the sense of reinforcements or punishments.* They reinforce actions in others which agree with their own actions, and they punish actions in others which disagree with their own actions. By agreement or disagreement, I mean accord or failure of accord in the way in which a given sequence of examples is continued. Sanctions are exclusively physical reinforcements and punishments at this stage.
- 5) *Sanctions are a means to come to conditions under which persons agree in their ways [193] of continuing a given sequence of examples.* In the case of agreement, sanctions reinforce the dispositions of the persons involved in the way in which they react to their environment. In the case of disagreement, sanctions in the form of punishments trigger a process of finding out in practice the obstacles in the persons involved or in the environment which prevent agreement. Sanctions thus induce a process of mutual adjustment that leads to convergence.
- 6) *Once conditions under which persons agree are filtered out, the rule is that in which the convergence of persons in their ways of continuing a given sequence of examples consists.*

Determining on the basis of each one's dispositions conditions in which the persons in question agree fixes what is correct to do for an indefinite number of situations. However, going beyond the ordinary situations with which the people in a given community deal, this account has to concede that there is for any finite sequence of actions a margin conceivable beyond which it is indeterminate what is the correct way to go on. In such an extraordinary situation, a further determination of the norm has to be carried out by means of the sketched process. Consequently, this account solves the *normativity problem* by offering a

reconstruction of how persons can come to follow rules. But it does not solve the *infinity problem*, i.e. the problem whether and how a finite sequence can determine infinitely many cases. It addresses this problem only insofar as this problem threatens our beliefs to be stripped of meaning: it shows how a finite sequence of examples can determine meaning for a community of persons within the scope of their ordinary practices.

3. The anti-reductionist implication

Consider the reply of Crispin Wright to Kripke's sceptical challenge in his book *Realism, Meaning and Truth*. He says:

Understanding cannot be always achieved via uniquely rational extrapolation from sample uses and explanations; and is not usually. Rather the path to understanding exploits certain *natural* propensities which we have, propensities to react and judge in particular ways. The concepts which we 'exhibit' by what we count as correct, or incorrect, use of a term need not be salient to a witness who is, if I may so put it, merely rational ... (Wright (1993), p. 28)

Although I do not intend to ascribe the sketched social account to Wright, the point which he makes emphasizes a crucial point of that account: a natural, biological equipment is a necessary condition for meaning becoming determined in social [194] interactions. The proposed social account says nothing against explaining the relevant dispositions in naturalistic terms. But however much the behaviour of a human may be determined by what can be described in these terms, the point at issue is how a human can follow rules in distinction to exhibiting mere regularities of behaviour; that is, the point is how she, from her perspective, can make a distinction between correct and incorrect rule-following in continuing a given sequence of examples. The account under consideration implies that to describe this distinction, normative, intentional vocabulary is indispensable. Consequently, the description of meaning cannot be reduced to a description in naturalistic terms, i.e. a description that is available for a detached observer.

Even if a detached observer is provided with a complete description of a human in naturalistic terms, she is in the situation of Kripke's sceptic, namely to be aware of no more than a finite sequence of actions that satisfies infinitely many rules in such a way that it is indeterminate for any new situation what is the correct way to go on. For such an observer there is no such thing as rule-following and thus no such thing as people having beliefs with a determinate meaning. As Wright puts it, such an observer is merely rational – or, one might say, too rational.

Hence, you have to participate in the social practices of rule-following of a community in order to be in a position to give an account of the rule that is followed in such a way that for all cases within the scope of these practices it is determined what is correct. *The other side of this irreducibility, however, is that meaning exists only relative to those who participate in a social practice.*

4. The argument for materialism

It is well known that the rule-following considerations as put forward by Kripke are an argument against reductionism in epistemology. But note the way in which I have reconstructed the argument in the preceding section: The intentional vocabulary is irreducible to a physical vocabulary because meaning is determined only relative to those who engage in certain social practices. Apart from that qualification, belief states fall victim to the infinity

problem and the normativity problem. I will now use this point to show that this account of rule-following also contains an argument for materialism in the metaphysics of mind.

It is common to define materialism as the theses that (1) mental states, including belief states, supervene on physical states and that (2) mental states are realized as physical states. Conceiving the meaning of our beliefs as some sort of a mental entity over and above the physical runs into both the infinity and the normativity problems which Kripke poses. The solution to both these problems which I have sketched consists in focussing on the social practices of assessing each other's actions as correct or [195] incorrect. All there is to the meaning of our beliefs is what is determined in these practices. Whatever indeterminacy there may be to the meaning of the beliefs of a person, to the extent that social practices achieve a determination of meaning on the basis of a biological equipment and a shared physical environment, nothing hinders us to say that these social practices supervene on the physical – at least if the physical is taken globally so that it includes not only the dispositions, but also the environment of a person. For the ontological thesis of supervenience does not imply the epistemological possibility of reduction.

Furthermore, these practices have a physical realization. Introducing anything in them which is not realized as physical states of the persons in their environment is of no help for the theory of meaning. Consequently, we can say that the belief states of a person, insofar as they are determined by and exist relative to the described social practices, are realized as physical states of the person in question in relation to her environment, although intentional properties are not identical with physical properties. Hence, due to the physical realization, ontologically speaking, there is nothing over and above the physical. But for us, relative to our social practices, some physical states can be such that they realize belief states.

If the argument from rule-following speaks against reductionism as well as against any sort of a dualist ontology as regards belief states, it may seem that one can pursue these considerations in such a way that one ends up in eliminative materialism. But this is not correct. The outlined account implies that as long as we continue to talk and thus engage in the described social practices, we have beliefs, because these practices make it that some of our states are belief states for us.

The position that having beliefs consists in engaging in the described social practices fits into the post-Cartesian project not to reify the mind (either as being an entity over and above the physical or as being nothing but some physical stuff among other physical stuff). An account of these social practices can be seen as developing the conceptual tools which are necessary to build up such a conception of the mind in positive terms. This account thereby links up the anti-reductionist continental tradition in epistemology, as it is pursued since Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* at the latest, with the tradition in analytic philosophy that is orientated towards science and inspired by materialism.

To sum up: On the one hand, the claim that the rule-following problem calls for an account of meaning in terms of social practices implies a limit to naturalism: the theory of meaning cannot be reduced to the vocabulary of the natural sciences; it has to employ irreducible normative, intentional vocabulary. On the other hand, this limit to naturalism is a consequence of the following: the account of meaning in terms of social practices implies that states of persons are belief states only relative to the practices of a community. As far as ontology is concerned, this account is thereby an argument for [196] materialism: belief states

are realized as physical states. Thus, by claiming that the problem of rule-following can be solved only relative to the practices of a social community, the Kripkean considerations give rise to an argument both contra reductionism in epistemology and in favour of materialism in ontology. Hence these considerations make a case for a non-reductive materialism in the metaphysics of mind.

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